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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL REACTION TO PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT ON ITALY

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald P. Spogli for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Opposition candidate Romano Prodi called the Ambassador March 23 to question the appropriateness of the timing of our recent public announcement on Italy. His likely foreign minister should Prodi win the April 9-10 election called the Ambassador later the same day to "de-dramatize" the situation. PM Berlusconi, who publicly defended the right of the USG to issue the announcement, called the Ambassador to say the story would soon leave the front pages of the Italian press. PM U/S Gianni Letta also called with the same message. We believe the announcement struck a chord in Italy's charged electoral atmosphere--Prodi saw it advantageous to launch a protest but agree with Berlusconi that the story should soon disappear. END SUMMARY.

PRESS COVERAGE EXTENSIVE

2. (C) Our public announcement highlighting the risk of violent political demonstrations and the possibility of a terrorist attack in Italy during Italy's upcoming election season has received wide coverage in both print and broadcast media. Center-right politicians in the current government of PM Silvio Berlusconi have generally defended the right of the U.S. to advise our citizens of any threats. FM Gianfranco Fini was quoted as saying it was logical the U.S. would be worried about no-global agitators who have recently organized violent protests in Genoa and Milan. Center-left coalition leader Romano Prodi has headlined left-leaning concerns that the timing of the announcement was unfortunate given political sensitivities surrounding the elections. Italy's political commentators have generally followed the tone set by their political leader of preference, i.e. left-leaning journalists have been critical of the announcement and right-leaning journalists supportive or relatively quiet.

SENIOR LEADERS CALLING THE AMBASSADOR

3. (C) Prodi today called the Ambassador March 23 to express concern about the timing of public announcement. Prodi said the timing was unfortunate given FM Gianfranco Fini's attempts to blame yesterday's violence in Genova on no-global groups "sponsored by the center-left." In a subsequent press interview, Prodi said he had raised his objections with the Ambassador and is quoted as saying the announcement creates an unnecessary sense of fear in the run-up to the elections. Democrats of the Left (DS) Party Secretary Piero Fassino, a possible foreign minister if the center-left wins, also called the Ambassador March 23 to "de-dramatize" the situation. The Ambassador explained to both Prodi and Fassino that the announcement was routine and that the timing was not meant to influence Italy's elections. The Embassy Press Office reports that Prodi's statement has fueled inquiries about the announcement. The Consular Section so far reports one inquiry from an American citizen on the announcement.

4. (C) The Ambassador spoke late March 23 with PM Berlusconi who said he expected the political posturing over the public announcement to wane quickly.

COMMENT

5. (C) COMMENT: Every issue is viewed through a political lens during Italy's tense campaign season. The reaction to our public announcement was no exception, and Prodi's reaction gave extra legs to what would normally have been a one-day story. His tactics, publicly standing up to the U.S. while sending his future foreign minister to privately reassure the Ambassador, allows him to keep his far-left in line while reassuring an important international ally. It's a mushy approach, to be sure, but possibly a harbinger of how a future Prodi government would reconcile competing internal and external political equities. COMMENT.
SPOGLI